Social Scientist

Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement c. 1925-1948
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Source: *Social Scientist*, Vol. 19, No. 5/6 (May - Jun., 1991), pp. 24-41
Published by: Social Scientist
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3517871
Accessed: 31/10/2014 11:09

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ANANDHI S.*

Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement c. 1925–1948

The *Suyamariathai Iyakkam* (Self Respect Movement) which was launched by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy Naicker in 1926, in an effort to democratise the Tamil Society, has been the theme of historical research by several non-Marxist and Marxist scholars.[1] In their writings the movement has been characterised in different ways—revivalist, pro-British, secessionist, anti-Brahmin etc.

A striking feature of the existing studies on the Self Respect Movement is their silence on its consistent struggle against women's oppression and its attempt to dismantle the ubiquitous structure of patriarchy in Tamil society. Although Marxist scholars like N. Ram and Arulalan have briefly dealt with this aspect of the movement,[2] a detailed systematic treatment of the same is yet to be done. This silence is significant because the question of women's emancipation was one of the central themes in the political agenda of the Self Respect Movement,[3] especially during its early phase.

The present paper is a modest attempt to fill this void in the current scholarship on the Self Respect Movement which is a result of writing history from the male point of view.[4] The paper therefore addresses itself to the question of how the movement perceived the women's question and in what manner it tried to resolve it.

IDEAS OF PERIYAR

After establishing a break with the Congress in 1924, Periyar[5] began to articulate, rather stridently, his views on such institutions of Tamil society like religion, caste hierarchy, and patriarchy. Opposing the reformist zeal of his contemporaries like Gandhi and those of the past like Siddhar and Ramanujam,[6] he called for a total break with the retrograde elements of the Tamil past. Addressing the South Indian

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Social Scientist, Vol. 19, Nos. 5–6, May–June 1991

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Reform Conference in 1928, he said, '. . . I have gradually lost faith in social reform. For one who believes in radical change, self-respect, equality and progress, the alternative (to the present situation) is not mere reform; but radical reconstructive work which would *destroy the traditional structures.*'[7]

This yearning for a total change marked his position on women's question too. Within the ambience of the Self Respect Movement he was not content with taking up such conventional themes of women's emancipation like widow-remarriage and women's education which, even if successful, did not undermine the existing structure of patriarchy; but he raised questions relating to basic pillars of patriarchy, like the monogamous family and the norms of chastity prescribed for and enforced upon women. Even while advocating women's education, his attempt was to direct it against the structure of patriarchy. He noted, 'The quality of education imparted to woman till now has been one of training woman to be an efficient house-wife—by designing the curriculum to include cooking, music, tailoring etc. Thus woman's education has been an advertisement to acquire a 'qualified' husband.' He argued, women's education should have the aim of providing employment for women and thus making them economically independent.[8]

The most important idea he had advanced was about marriage and family which he identified as the key institutions sustaining patriarchy. Since marriage enabled women to be enslaved as the property of men he insisted that marriage as an institution should be abolished. Speaking in a women's meeting at Victoria Hall, Madras, in 1948 he attacked the concepts of marriage and family:

> The concept of husband-wife relationship has been one of master-slave relationship. The essential philosophy of marriage has been to insist on women's slavery . . . why should human beings alone keep such contract of one-man-one-woman relationship . . . until women are liberated from such marriages and from men, our country cannot attain independence.[9]

Despite his disapproval of marriage as an institution he approved a certain kind of marriage which transcended the traditional and socially-accepted norms for women. He opposed all ritualistic practices associated with marriages, including the tying of *tali* around the neck of the bride by the bridegroom which he treated as a symbol of women's subjection to men. He also opposed arranged marriages and advocated that men and women should choose their partners at their own free will.[10]

The notion of woman's chastity, which sustained monogamous family, was another subject of his criticism. In one of his pamphlets entitled *Penn Yean Adimaiyanal?* (Why did women become enslaved?), which was initially written as a series of articles in 1928,

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he noted: 'The imposition of 'patrivratha' qualities on women has destroyed their independence and free-thinking and made them unquestioning slaves—to men—who are supposed to demonstrate undue faith over chastity.'[11] He also attacked classical Tamil literary texts such as *Silaparikaram* and *Thirulcural* for preaching chastity as a necessary quality for women.[12] Instead, he suggested polyandry and divorce as solutions for women's oppression. In speeches delivered at various places in 1935 he argued, 'Divorce is a protective instrument in the hands of many oppressed women. Along with Divorce Act there should be a provision for compulsory registration of all marriages.'[13]

According to Periyar, while marriage and chastity were key patriarchal institutions, patriarchy as such was ubiquitous, pervading spheres like language, literature and gender-based socialization. In his writings about women's oppression and in his speeches at self-respect marriages he noted with contempt that the Tamil language did not have words for the male counterpart of adultress and widow.[14] He invented the neologism for widower, *Vidavan* and for male prostitute, *vibacharan* and suggested their use. He also noted that several words are used in Tamil literature and in daily life in derogation of women such as *Aanmai* (masculinity). He wrote,

> Women should not forget that the word *aanmai* itself is used in derogation to women. . . As long as *aanmai* will exist, women's slavery will only grow. It is definite that the emancipation of women will not materialise till women themselves destroy the philosophy of *aanmai*. . . .[15]

The Tamil language, in his opinion, was 'barbaric', as it did not have 'respectable words for women.'[16] Delivering a speech at Tirupattur in 1946, Periyar strongly criticised Tamil literature for describing women's bodily features at length and ignoring their intellectual faculties. He argued that unless women oppose such a projection of their image in the literature, neither literary traditions nor their own status would change.[17]

Apart from attacking the institutions of patriarchy and condemning its ubiquitous nature, Periyar also underlined its relationship with the control of property.

> When people were totally free without property in land, I do not think there were these slavish practices of women's oppression and compulsory marriage contracts. *When there was no concept of accumulating private property . . . there could not have been any compulsion for acquiring heir for the family—property—through child-birth.* Only when the desire for private property came into practice the concept of marriage and imprisoning women to protect the family property also came into practice. Once a woman was made the guardian of man's property, she herself became his

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property to produce heir for the family . . . women lost their right to worship their gods but only their husbands. The private property which has been the main reason for women's oppression has to be totally destroyed in order to achieve women's liberation.[18]

In the context of Periyar's view that private property with its need to have inheritors, gave rise to women's subjection in order to produce heirs for property, his advocacy of birth control assumes significance. Arguing that women should have the right to decide to have children, he differentiated his position from the other advocates of birth-control by focussing attention on women's choice: 'There is a basic difference between our insistence on birth-control and other's notion of birth-control. . . They have only thought of family and national welfare through birth-control. But we are only concerned about women's health and women's independence through birth-control.'[19]

Periyar's trenchant criticism of Hinduism was influenced by its role in legitimising patriarchy.[20] While addressing a women audience, he reminded them that the *varanashrama dharma* and Hindu religion had treated them only as *dasis* (prostitutes) of gods who, in turn, tested only women's chastity and not that of men. Ridiculing bigamous gods he said, 'Sisters, you should never perform any rituals to gods who keep two wives and concubines. You must ask the god why he needs two wives and why does he need a marriage every year! How could you worship stones as gods and fall at the feet of Brahmin priests who have legitimised your slavery through religion and rituals?'[21]

Periyar's commitment to the cause of women's emancipation often led him to be critical of his own political comrades. In anguish, he noted, 'The self-proclaimed liberators of women, the Dravidian intellectuals, have kept their daughters, sisters and mothers as mere decorative pieces at home.'[22] He openly condemned the Justice Party ministry, despite his general support to it, for its attitude towards women's question and its failure to effectively implement the anti-child marriage act. Periyar demanded the resignation of A.P. Patro and other Justice Party ministers from the party as they failed to enact any legislation to improve the conditions of women.[23] In his personal life too he was self-critical about his inability to practise his preachings and writings on women's liberation. Writing an emotion-laden obituary of his wife, Nagammal, in *Kudi Arasu* (14 May 1933), he noted, 'I am ashamed to state here that I had not practised even one hundredth of what I wrote and preached about women's emancipation at home with Nagammal'.

Periyar's views on women's question found practical expression in the activities of the Self Respect Movement. The movement, *inter alia*, practised self respect marriages, organised women's conferences to raise their consciousness and to highlight their problems and involved women in mass agitations.

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ACTIVITIES OF SELF RESPECT MOVEMENT

(a) *Marriages*

One of the important activities of the Self Respect Movement which challenged the traditional Hindu marriages and introduced radical changes in them was the conducting of self respect marriages. Self respect marriages were conducted from 1928 onwards among various non-Brahmin castes. These marriages which took place even in the remote villages and were regularly reported in the newspaper of the movement, *Kudi Arasu*, included inter-caste marriages, widow-remarriages and marriages of consent.

The central aim of self respect marriages was to free the institution of marriage from Hindi rituals which emphasised monogamous familial norms and chastity for women and thus legitimised patriarchy.[24] Accordingly, these marriages were conducted without Brahmin priests and recitation of religious texts. More significantly they did away with the tying of the *tali*. In keeping with the rationalistic content of the Self Respect Movement, often they were arranged in times which were treated inauspicious by the Hindu calendar (*Rahu Kalam*). Some of the marriages took place at midnight,[25] which is generally considered to be inauspicious time. All these challenged and subverted the religious aura that entrapped the institution of marriage.

We shall give below three such marriages to show how the movement refused to treat marriages as a personal affair and converted them into spectacular political events aimed at breaking the traditional norms of patriarchy.

(1) The self respect marriage between Sivagami, a young widow belonging to an orthodox Hindu family in Thanjavur district and Sami Chidambaranar, a Tamil scholar and a dedicated activist of the movement, took place in 1930. Though Sivagami had given her full consent to marry Chidambaranar, there was stubborn opposition for the marriage from both the families. This forced Periyar to shift the venue of the marriage from Kumbakonam, the town from which Sivagami hailed, to Erode, Periyar's own native town, well known for trading activities.[26]

The marriage which was presided over by E.V.R Nagammal did not have any of the rituals of traditional Hindu marriages, including the tying of *tali*. Speaking at the marriage, Nagammal explained how *tali* and other rituals associated with Hindu marriages symbolished the slavery of women to men. The couple exchanged rings, took an oath which emphasised friendship and equality between them, and addressed each other as comrades and friends instead of the usual 'husband' and 'wife'. And, as if to highlight the political dimension of the marriage, it was arranged in the venue of the Second Self Respect Conference itself.

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In the evening, to propagate the need for widow remarriages and self respect marriages, the married couple were taken out in a procession in the streets of Erode by the Self Respect Movement activists. People indeed gathered in large numbers along the route of the procession to watch the iconoclastic couple.[27]

(2) The marriage between Kamalambal and Nallasivan which took place in the same year at Nagerkoil near Kanyakumari generated lot of tension among the members of the Saliar caste who were traditional handloom weavers. It was a marriage between a widow and widower, each of them having a child from their previous marriages.[28] The marriage was conducted by Periyar and Nagai Kaliappan[29] in a cinema hall. In the course of the marriage, the bridegroom transferred Rs 5,000 worth of his property to the bride in consonance with the Self Respect Movement's ideal that women should have equal property right as men.

About 2,500 people visited the venue of the marriage to witness the unusual event. While Periyar extolled the virtues of such marriages, A. Ponnambalanar and M. Maragadavalli[30] sang songs of the Self Respect Movement. Pamphlets dealing with the theme of self respect marriages and the stance of the movement on man-woman relationship were distributed to the participants.

(3) The self respect marriage between two activists of the movement, S. Neelavathi and Ramasubramaniam, took place at Pallathur in Ramanathapuram district in 1930. The marriage was attended by about 2,000 male and 500 women activists of the Self Respect Movement. In addition, about 100 local people also participated in it.[31]

Interestingly, as part of the wedding, the audience were allowed and encouraged to ask questions relating to man-woman relation, marriage, women's emancipation etc. One of the participants asked Periyar why the Self Respect Movement allowed a second marriage. Periyar's response was that marriages could only be tentative arrangements between men and women and they should not be treated as eternal. He further said that men and women should have equal right to marry anyone of their preference even after having first marriage and divorce should be permitted.[32]

The above three cases which were among the several marriages reported in the pages of *Kudi Arasu* give an idea of how the Self Respect Movement politicised marriages and used them as public events to propagate their views on the women's question. That was why marriage venues were decorated with the symbols and slogans of the movement. For instance, the self respect marriage venue in a small village near Cuddalore in 1928 had welcome arches bearing slogans like 'Long Live Self Respect Movement' and 'Long Live Vaikkam Veerar.'[33] The walls inside the marriage hall were adorned with huge posters explaining the objectives and activities of the movement.

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Invariably, all these marriages, whether they were held at the house of a lowly Marimuthu belonging to cobbler caste[34] or a political elite like W.P.A. Soundara Pandian,[35] were attended and addressed by activists of the movement—especially by women activists. They spoke on these occasions on themes relating to women's emancipation and demanded legislative protection of women's rights.[36] In an effort to popularise such marriages, Periyar personally attended most of the marriages during the early days of the movement, even if they took place in remote villages.[37]

The Movement organised several thousand such marriages in the Tamil areas during its three decades of political career. For instance, between 1929 and 1932 there were about 8000 self respect marriages were conducted.[38] While certain marriages viewed women's liberation as their aim there were still others which were against Brahmin domination as they dispensed with Brahmin priests and Sanskritic scriptures. An exasperated Periyar, addressing a marriage party in 1931, objected to calling every anti-priest anti-ritual marriage as self respect marriage and said that with time, one of the objectives of the movement should be to do away with marriages themselves.[39] Then, freeing marriages from rituals themselves was no doubt a step ahead.

(b) *Conferences*

Another important aspect of the Self Respect Movement was the conferences it organised. These conferences, which were periodically organised both at the provincial and district levels were characterised by slogan-chanting processions, long speeches aimed at propagating the ideology of the movement and passing of resolutions on various political themes. The Self Respect Movement used these conferences as a regular political site to take up women's issues and to encourage women's political participation.

The first provincial Self Respect Conference was held at Chengleput, near Madras, in 1929.[40] Apart from articulating its views on themes like Simon Commission, caste oppression and religious institutions, the conference dealt specifically with 'marriage and other rituals.' It demanded that men and women should have the right over property. The Second Provincial Self Respect Conference was held in 1930 at Erode.[41] Within the ambience of this Conference two other conferences were organised: a youth conference and a women's conference. In the context of organising separate women's conferences, one may note that Periyar passionately believed that women's emancipation would be possible only by the efforts of women. He was critical of man's advocacy of woman's emancipation: 'As of now, men's struggle for women's liberation has only strengthened women's enslavement.'[42] The proceedings of the women's conferences, were fully conducted by women activists and it demanded, *inter alia*, compulsory

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education for girls upto the age of 16, effective and immediate implementation of anti-child marriage and divorce acts, equal property right for women, implementation of Devadasi Bill to prevent young girls from being initiated as prostitutes etc.[43] The fact that there was a separate conference of women did not come in the way of the general conference and the youth conference taking up women's issues. The youth conference, for example, appealed that young men should come forward to marry widows and *devadasis* who were willing to marry.[44]

The practice of having a separate women's conference along with every major self respect conference became a permanent feature of the movement in the subsequent years. The Second Women's Conference held at Virudunagar in 1931 increased its demands. It also argued that women should not be recruited only for professions like teaching and medicine, but should be inducted even into the army and police; and it called for powers to the local magistrates to identify those temples which encouraged *devadasi* system.[45]

While special women's conferences provided an exclusive space for women activists of the Self Respect Movement to articulate themselves on women's issues, their participation in general conferences was also substantial. That is women were not 'ghettoised' within the movement. Often the much honoured role of delivering the inaugural addresses of conferences fell on the shoulders of women activists. To cite a few instances: in 1931, Indrani Balasubramanian inaugurated the Third Self Respect Conference at Virudunagar;[46] in 1932, T.S. Kunchidam inaugurated the Tanjavur District Self Respect Conference;[47] in 1933, S. Neelavathi inaugurated the Third Tanjavur District Self Respect Conference; in 1934, R. Annapurani inaugurated the Tiruchenkod Taluk Adi Dravida Conference;[48] in 1937, Meenambal Sivaraj presided over the Tinnelveli District Third Adi Dravida Conference;[49] and in 1938 the Madurai Self Respect Conference was inaugurated by Rajammal.[50] In the course of the inaugural addresses, these women speakers discussed the various aspects of the women's question. This participation was of Periyar's efforts to break the culture of silence which influenced the women activists of the movement: he insisted that even the most inarticulate women activists should utter at least a few words in the women's conference.[51] The success of these self respect conferences in politicising women can be summarised in the following words of Singaravelu Chettiar:[52]

> Women who have been confined to the kitchen are speaking today from public platforms; they are debating about public issues; they are involved in social work as equals of men: the credit for facilitating all these goes to Periyar.
>
> It is rare to find women in other movements who are as skilled in public oratory as they are in this movement. During the last fifty

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> years, the Indian National Congress could produce only one Sarojini Naidu.
>
> . . . What an ability women belonging to the Self Respect Movement have in organising their own conferences—independently and with true equality. In other movements, women figure only as an adjunct to men's activities; but in our movement, they function as an independent group and involve in—the movement's—activities demonstrating equality with men.[53]

It was the conference of the Progressive Women's Association, held in Madras in 1938 that bestowed the honorific title *Periyar* (The Great One) on E.V. Ramasamy 'for his unparalleled activism to transform the South Indian Society.'[54] This title became the short-hand for his name all through his life and after.

Some leading women activists were elected to the Central Council of the organising committee of Tamilnadu provincial conference through the conference every year. For instance, at the Third Provincial Conference at Virudhunagar in 1931, Indirani Balasubramaniam was elected as council member. When the Samadharma Party conference was held at Erode in 1933, S. Neelavathi and K. Kunchidam were elected as Propaganda Secretaries to establish the Self Respect League in villages. Few other women like R. Annapurani, and Ramamirtham Ammal, were chosen as district and inter-district Samadharma propagandists.[55]

The women members of the Self Respect Movement not only participated in the non-agitational programmes of the movement like conferences, but also quite actively in mass agitations. The most significant mass agitation launched by the movement during the period of our study was the anti-Hindi agitation which continued for over two years, from late 1937 to early 1940. The agitation forced the Congress ministry headed by C. Rajagopalachari to reverse its decision to introduce Hindi as a compulsory subject in the school curriculum.

During the initial phase of the agitation, women members of the movement actively participated in processions and meetings. Women clad in sarees with the Tamil flag[56] printed on them and chanting anti-Hindi and pro-Tamil slogans were a distinct feature of these processions and public meetings.[57] The meetings were also addressed by women activists. For instance a huge public meeting organised at the Triplicane beach in Madras on 11 September 1938 to receive a symbolic Tamil army, which marched by foot from Trichinopoly district to Madras propagating anti-Hindi message, was addressed by not less than four women activists; Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, Narayani Ammaiyar, Va.ba.Thamaraikanni Ammaiyar, Munnagara Azhagiyar.[58] Also, the women activists organised farewell committees to see off their male comrades to prison.[59]

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With the agitation gaining strength over time, batches of women activists courted arrest. The first batch of five women consisting of Dr. Dharmambal, Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, Malar Mugathammaiyar, Pattammal and Seethammal were arrested on 14 November 1938, in Madras.[60] Wearing sarees printed with the Tamil flag and singing Bharathidasan's evocative song calling for a Tamil army to save the language, they were led in a procession from Kasi Visvanathan Temple in Pethu Nayakkan Pettai to Hindu Theological School. On the route of the procession they were stopped at various points and garlanded. For picketing the school, they were arrested and imprisoned for six weeks.[61] Though the judge offered them the option of paying a fine of Rs 50 or undergoing 6 weeks imprisonment, they chose the latter.

From then onwards women activists of the movement courted arrest with different intervals, till September 1939 when the last batch of five women were arrested. In total, 73 women were arrested and jailed for their involvement in the anti-Hindi agitation. Significantly, several of them went to jail with their children; thirty two children accompanying their mothers to jail.[62] An exasperated member of the Congress ministry, commented that women were getting arrested to get milk for their children in the jail! The Madras provincial women's conference held at Vellore in 1938, demanded that the minister concerned take back his comment and offer an unconditional apology.[63] The Self Respect Movement's newspaper *Kudi Arasu* prominently reported the women's involvement in the agitation and published transcript of the arguments they had in the court and their photographs. And Periyar himself was arrested during the agitation on the charge of inciting women to fill the jails.

In concluding this section, we shall cite an exchange that took place between a woman activist of the Self Respect Movement, arrested for participating in the anti-Hindi agitation, and a prosecuting Inspector in a Madras Court:

> *Prosecuting Inspector:* You are with your small children, prison is painful and your husband will suffer. If you promise you will not do similar things in future (i.e., participating in such agitations), we shall pardon you.
>
> *Women activist:* . . .We are willing to bear any suffering for the progress of our language, our nation. *Our husbands have no right to interfere in this.* They are not the ones to do so.[64]

WOMEN ACTIVISTS AND THEIR CONSCIOUSNESS

A Case Study

The Self Respect Movement, as we have seen, had provided space for the encouraged political activism among women. To explore how far the movement had succeeded in raising the consciousness of women about their own plight, one needs to construct case histories of these

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women activists. We shall provide below the portrait of an extraordinary woman who began her life as a *devadasi*[65], but transformed herself, over the years, to become a front ranking participant in the Self Respect Movement.

Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar was born in 1883 in the Isai Vellalar caste, one of the caste from which *devadasis* were drawn. She was brought up in a *devadasi* family at the small village of Moovalur in Thanjavur district, and was initiated into the *devadasi* system at a young age. Writing in *Kudi Arasu* in 1925, she noted, 'I was born in a traditional non-*devadasi* family. . . My uncle and aunt persuaded my father to force me into prostitution, through the *devadasi* custom. They also advised not to marry me away, since I would fetch a handsome amount for the family through the profession, given my talents in music and dance. . . . So my parents forced me into this custom. It was during this time, I deeply thought about this custom as evil and read those religious texts which advocated it. I felt that men have forced certain women into this degrading profession to pursue their indiscreet pleasures and for selfish reasons.'[66] This awareness led her to walk out of the despicable *devadasi* life and marry a musician Suyambu Pillai on her own accord. This marriage created furore in her community and resulted in her being ostracised.[67]

Ramamirtham Ammaiyar began her political career in the Indian National Congress. As a Congress activist, her full energy was expended in tackling the question of women's position in Tamil society especially that of *devadasis*. In her words: 'I have been struggling for the past seven or eight years to abolish this *devadasi* custom. I have also organised a conference to reform our women and break the *devadasi* system. Without invitations, I barged into houses, where marriages were held, to advocate simple marriages and to expose the evils of *devadasi* system. I have forced women to keep the promise of discouraging their fellow women from becoming *devadasis*. Some men have been constantly campaigning against my battle against the system. . . . They are threatening . . . that they would smash my skull if I preach in marriages against the *devadasi* system'.[68]

From her writings, it is not clear why she left the Congress to join the Self Respect Movement. However, it is only evident that her break with the Congress which occurred during mid-1920s was sharp and complete. In 1956, while remembering her involvement in the Self Respect Movement, she wrote, 'once Gandhi had written to me a letter appreciating my efforts towards *devadasi* abolition. I used to worship that letter. After I left the Congress, not only that letter, even Gandhi had got erased from my mind.'[69] One may note here that Ramamirtham Ammaiyar met Gandhi in 1921, during his visit to Mayuram and this meeting gave added fillip to her activism in the Congress.[70]

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In the course of her political career in the Self Respect Movement, she acted as a relentless political campaigner against women's slavery. As a full-time activist of the movement, she addressed various conferences of the movement and elaborated how Hinduism and upper caste men were legitimising women's slavery.[71] She arranged and addressed several self respect marriages in different places, and one such significant marriage arranged by Ramamirtham was the widow-remarriage of Sivagami and Chidambaranar, which we have earlier described in some detail.[72] During the anti-Hindi agitation in 1938, she propagated the anti-Hindi message through a *padayatra* from Trichi to Madras and was arrested. This *padayatra* started on 1 August 1938 from Uraiyur (Trichy), covered around 577 miles and reached Madras after 42 days. During the *padayatra* about 87 public meetings were addressed by the group.[73]

Significantly, Ramamirtham Ammaiyar authored essays regularly in *Kudi Arasu* on the condition of women. Here one may note that Ramamirtham Ammaiyar had informal education only upto Third Standard. In 1936, she published a voluminous novel in Tamil running into 303 pages, with the title *Tasikalin Mosavalai Allathu Matipettra Mainer* (The treacherous net of the Dasis or a minor grown wise).[74] The novel, which did not follow the tradition of Tamil literary style however remained an interesting document since 'it is based on personal experiences of the authoress who after all was a professional dasi herself.[75] It dealt with how two *devadasi* sisters who were exploited by wealthy men walked out of the profession and organised *Devadasigal Munnetra Sangam* (Federation of the Progress of Devadasis) to abolish the system. This semi-autobiographical novel carried a poignant and political preface in which she wrote,

> My strong opinion is that from the ancient time the temple priests, kings and the landlords, . . . in the name of art, had encouraged particular communities to indulge in prostitution.
>
> . . . These days more than the Kumbakonam Shastris, Satyamurthy Shastri have been making noise about preserving the Devadasi custom.
>
> . . . Our women have been suppressed in all spheres. The legitimisation of the suppression given through religion and *shastras* is evident in the manner in which women have been assigned the role of prostitutes. Through '*Potarrupu Sangam*' I propagated the anti-devadasi message for which among the Devadasi community itself there were opposition. Prominent religious heads, Devadasi agents, reform leaders—everybody openly opposed my stand. . . . Then I decided that it is easy to oppose imperialism and Brahminism but not the Devadasi System.[76]

Another fictional serial that Ramamirtham Ammaiyar wrote in *Dravida Nadu* in 1945, *Damayanthi*, also deals with the question of

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devadasis. The woman protagonist in the novel breaks out of the *devadasi* system and becomes a teacher and accuses religious texts of imposing the practice of prostitution on a section of women and questions the rationale of God's carnal desires to have women as *dasis*. Through the narrative, she also attacked untouchability and the economic exploitation of the poor by the rich.[77]

An irrepressible activist and a writer, Ramamirtham Ammaiyar finally quit the Dravida Kazhagam (which was the new name the Self Respect Movement acquired in 1944) in 1949 to join the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam founded by C.N. Annadurai along with others. The reason for her quitting the movement was significant; she did not approve of and openly criticised Periyar's decision to marry a 20-year old young woman when he was sixty.[78]

The tale of Ramamirtham Ammaiyar was indeed extraordinary. From being a *devadasi*, she became a foremost champion of women's cause in Tamil areas. Her commitment to the cause made her disagree with and break away from Periyar despite two decades of comradeship between them. Ramamirtham Ammaiyar does not represent an 'average' woman activist of the Self Respect Movement, but one who marked the outer limit to which a woman activist of the movement could reach out.

WOMEN'S QUESTION: TWO APPROACHES—THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND THE SELF RESPECT MOVEMENT

The radical content of the Self Respect Movement's approach to the women's question can be fully understood only when we compare it with other contemporary political movements. The most important political movement which was contemporary to the Self Respect Movement was, of course, the nationalist movement. For lack of space, we shall present below a synoptic view of how the nationalist movement 'resolved' the women's question, and compare it with the Self Respect Movement.

In a recent paper, Partha Chatterjee has shown that the nationalist movement resolved the women's question by reworking and reaffirming the pre-existing patriarchal structure. The nationalists, while approving of imitating and incorporating the material culture of the west argued that adopting the west in aspects which were spiritual or anything other than the material sphere of western civilization would threaten the self-identity of the national culture itself. As an extension of this position, they located home as the site to retain the 'inner spirituality of indigenous life' and women as the agents responsible for that. It was advocated that women could meet this responsibility of preserving the spiritual core of the national culture through 'chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience and the labour of love.' Only within this 'new patriarchy' the nationalist movement attempted all its reforms related to women. As long as women demonstrated these so-called feminine/spiritual

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qualities, 'they could go to school, travel in public conveyance, watch public entertainment programmes and in time even take up employment outside home.'[79]

The nationalist movement mobilised women in the anti-colonial struggle—especially from 1920 onwards—only within the framework of this new patriarchy. The traditional feminine roles such as nurturing mother, obedient daughter, god-fearing chaste wife who would never defy the husband were extended to the public realm to expand women's participation outside.[80] While Abadi Banu Begam had to appear in public platforms by presenting herself as a mother by invoking her maternal nickname 'Bi Amman,'[81] the Calcutta prostitutes' support to the non-cooperation movement came under fire from the nationalist intelligentsia.[82]

In illustrating how the nationalists in the Tamil-speaking areas addressed the women's question, one may begin with the views of Thiruvi Kalyanasundaram, an activist in the national movement and a Tamil writer who enjoyed a pan-Tamil appeal despite his nationalist politics. In one of his earliest and a very popular book *Penin Perumai*[83] ('Women's Pride', 1927), he defined feminity as encapsulating patience, endurance, sacrifice, selflessness, beauty and love, and essentialised feminity as motherhood. According to him, all women were created to be mothers and they should be worshipped since they were the procrators as well as the transmitters of moral values to the new generation of children. Opposing western-type of education, he suggested that girls should be provided with education that would ingrain in them traditional moral and religious values and train them if such household duties as hushing and pounding of rice, tailoring etc.

Muthulakshmi Reddi, another nationalist who took up the women's cause through her activities in the Women's India Association, is much remembered for her campaign against the Devadasi system. Significantly, her opposition to the Devadasi system stemmed from her view that it stood in the way of women being chaste wives. Similarly, she held conservative views on the question of contraception—despite being a medical practitioner. She did not perceive the link between contraception and women's freedom and could only advocate—rather reluctantly—the Gandhian ideal of self-control or Brahmachariya as a means of contraception.[84]

Such tendencies were even more acute in the case of other nationalist leaders such as C. Rajagopalachari and S. Satyamurthy. When Muthulakshmi Reddy initiated the debate on *devadasi* abolition, Rajagopalachari, as the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee refused to take up the issue for discussion.[85] Satyamurthy on the other hand, went to the extent of claiming that the *devadasis* represented national art and culture and hence the system should be retained and every *devadasi* should dedicate at least one girl to be a future *devadasi*.[86] In the same vein, he also vehemently opposed the

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Child-marriage Restraint Act, on the ground that it would hurt the sentiments of the Hindus.[87]

Thus the nationalists failed to develop a critique of the institution of patriarchy and rather valorised patriarchy as a necessity. It is only too evident that the position of the Self Respect Movement on the women's question was in sharp contrast to that of the nationalist movement. The institutions of patriarchy like family, marriage and chastity, which were defended by the nationalist movement, were called into question by Periyar and his followers. They programmatically attempted to challenge these institutions through means like Self Respect Marriages. In short while the nationalists preserved patriarchy the mobilising women for politics, the Self Respect Movement mobilised them to contest patriarchy.

In saying this, however, we do not imply that the spread of anti-patriarchal consciousness among the followers of the Self Respect Movement was even. It is indeed true that the movement quite clearly exhibited patriarchal consciousness in its functioning, especially during its later phase. One can cite several illustrations towards this; while in the early phase of the movement both men and women were addressed by a single word 'Thozhar' (comrade), with the formation of the Dravida Kazhagam in 1944 women activists were rechristened as 'mothers and sisters'; in the public meetings and conferences during the anti-Hindi agitation, women activists were introduced in terms of the achievements of their fathers and husbands; during the same agitation, women activists themselves likened Tamil language to a chaste woman like Kannagi and called for women's participation to protect the chastity of the Tamil language:[88] and the Dravida Kazhagam's aims and objectives stated in the Trichinopoly conference in 1945 did not have any specific reference to women's issues, but for calling them to participate in the party activities.[89]

These examples go to show that, while the Self Respect Movement challenged patriarchy, it failed to create a new anti-patriarchal consciousness even among its own followers. The old regressive ideas carrying patriarchal values was dormant within the movement and asserted itself when given the opportunity to arise.

[I am grateful to Professor K.N. Panikkar, Biswamoy Pati, Padmini Swaminathan, K. Chandhu, Karunakaran, Meera V. and Anna Chandy for their insightful comments on an earlier draft.]

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NOTES

1. The Self Respect Movement is only one phase of the Dravidian Movement and the present paper deals with only this phase. In its subsequent incarnations, it has taken the forms of Dravida Kazhagam, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam.

   For some of the non-Marxist studies on the movement, see: Robert L. Hardgrave Jr., *The Dravidian Movement*, Bombay, 1965; Eugene Irschick, *The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916–1929*, California, 1969; Margurite Ross Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton, 1976.

   For the Marxist studies, see:

   N. Ram, 'Dravidian Movement in its pre-independence Phases,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, Vol.XIV, No. 7 and 8, February 1979; P. Ramamurthy, *Ariya Mayaiya? Dravida Mayaiya? Viduthalai Porum Dravida Iyakkamum*, Madras, 1987, (in Tamil).
2. N. Ram, *op. cit.*; Arulalam, 'The Relevance of Periyar: Caste or Class Struggle?' *The Radical Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, May 1971.
3. A brief obituary of Periyar published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 January 1974, succintly brings out his life-long commitment to the women's cause: 'He championed the cause of widow-remarriage, of marriages based on consent, and of women's right to divorce and abortion. Pointing out that there was no Tamil word for the male counterpart of an adultress, he fumed, '. . . the word adultress implies man's conception of woman as a slave, a commodity to be sold and hired.' Periyar's demand at a conference two years ago that no odium should be attached to a woman who desired a man other than her husband (which the press so avidly vulgarished), as well as Periyar's advocacy of the abolition of marriage as the only way of freeing women from enslavement, were about as radical as the views of any women liberationist.'
4. In the recent past there have been conscious attempts made by historians to write women's history by amassing different kinds of source materials to make women visible in history. For the importance of the need for writing women's history, see: Elizabeth Fox-Genovesse, 'Placing Women's History in History,' *New Left Review*, No. 133, May–June 1982.
5. E.V. Ramasamy Naicker or Periyar, a Balija Naidu from Erode, started his early life as a merchant, later as a Municipal Council Chairman of Erode, and then as a local Congress leader. In 1920 he became an ardent non-co-operationist, propagating khadi and anti-liquor activities. In 1924 he became the leader of Vaikom-Satyagraha and was twice arrested. In 1925, after his confrontation with the local Congress leaders at the Conjeevaram conference he openly criticised Congress for not showing interest in the welfare of the non-Brahmins. Finally in 1927 he left the Congress for good and began the self respect movement.
6. Siddars were iconoclastic mystic poets who represented a movement of revolt against temple worship, casteism and Brahmin piresthood. Their period was 10 to 15 A.D. Ramanujam was a socio-religious reformer of the 12th Century A.D.
7. *Kudi Arasu*, 26 November 1928 (emphasis mine).
8. Ibid., 10 January 1948; 21 September 1946.
9. *Viduthalai*, 11 October 1948.
10. Periyar had delivered numerous speeches and had written extensively in the party newspapers, expressing the above views. To cite only some instance:

    Kudi Arasu, 22 December 1929, 20 September 1931, 29 September 1940, 17 November 1940, 24 November 1945; *Paguthariyu*, 1 April 1936; *Paguthariyu*, 7 October 1937; *Puratchi*, 17 July 1934.
11. E.V. Ramasamy, *Pen Yean Adimaiyanal?* (Why did women become enslaved?) Erode, 1942, pp. 11–16.
12. Ibid., p. 16–25.
13. *Kudi Arasu*, 16 July 1935; 26 December 1929. *Viduthalai*, 24 October 1948.
14. *Kudi Arasu*, 26 October 1930, 21 September 1930 and E.V. Ramasamy, *Pen Yean Adimaiyanal? op. cit.*, p. 48,
15. *Kudi Arasu*, 12 August 1928.
16. Charles Ryerson, *Regionalism and Religion, The Tamil Renaissance and Popular Hinduism*, Madras, 1988, p. 100.

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17. *Kudi Arasu*, 21 September 1946.
18. *Viduthalai*, 11 October 1948, (emphasis mine).
19. *Kudi Arasu*, 14 December 1930, 1 March 1931 and 6 April 1931, and *Pen Yean Adimaiyanal? op. cit.*, p.
20. Ibid. 22 December 1929.
21. Ibid., 5 July 1948.
22. Ibid., 21 September 1946; see also E.V. Ramasamy, *Pen Yean Adimaiyanal? op. cit.*, p. 62; E.V. Ramasamy, *Vazhkai Thunai Nalam*, Madras, 1977, p. 35.
23. *Kudi Arasu*, 23 September 1928; 29 December 1929.
24. We come across one Self Respect marriage in which the couples were Muslims. Hajurulla Mohaideen married Kameeja Begam in 1936 without any religious rites and the bride did not wear the customary purdah during the marriage. See, *Kudi Arasu*, 16 February 1936.
25. Sami Chidambaranar, *Tamilar Thalaivar* (leader of the Tamils), Madras, 1983, pp. 118–119.
26. Interview with Sivagami Chidambaranar, Madras, 5 April, 1989.
27. *Kudi Arasu*, 11 May 1930.
28. Ibid., 14 September 1930.
29. Nagai Kalliapan was one of leading propagandists in the movement who travelled to Burma and Malaysia to propagate the movement's ideals among the overseas Tamils.
30. A. Ponnambalanar was a prominent intellectual who wrote frequently in *Kudi Arasu*. M. Maragadavalli was the editor of the journal, *Madhar Marumanam* (widow-remarriage), published from Karaikudi during the mid 1930s.
31. S.A.K.K. Raju, *Neelavathi Ramasubramaniam Vazhkai Varalaru* (The Life history of Neelavathi Ramasubramaniam), 1983, pp. 14–57.
32. *Kudi Arasu*, 12 October 1930.
33. *Kudi Arasu*, 23 December 1928. Periyar was called *Vaikom Veerar* because of his leadership in the Vaikom Satyagraha (Temple-entry Movement) in 1924.
34. The self respect marriage between Marimathu and Thaiyammal took place on 20 April 1930 at Coimbatore. See, *Kudi Arasu*, 27 April 1930.
35. W.P.A. Soundara Pandian, one of the leading activists in the movement during the 1930s, conducted widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages among the Nadars.
36. For instance see, *Kudi Arasu*, 25 December 1932.
37. Sami Chidambaranar, *op. cit.*, p. 323.
38. E.Sa. Viswanathan, *The Political Career of E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker*, Madras, 1983, p. 99.
39. *Kudi Arasu*, 21 June 1931.
40. K. Veeramani (ed.), *Namadu Kurikkol* (Our Objectives), Madras, 1982, pp. 5–12.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 13 and 16–21.
42. Sami Chidambaranar, *op. cit.*, p. 218.
43. *Kudi Arasu*, 18 May 1930.
44. K. Veeramani (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 17.
45. Ibid., pp. 25–26; *Kudi Arasu*, 16 August 1931.
46. *Kudi Arasu*, 16 August 1931.
47. Ibid., 26 June 1932.
48. Ibid., 9 April 1933.
49. Ibid., 27 May 1934.
50. Ibid., 7 February 1937.
51. Interview with Rajammal Vasudevan, Darasuram, 21 November 1988.
52. Singaravelu Chettiar, a leading activist of the Self Respect Movement in the 1930s, initiated the Self Respect League and started the Samadharma Party along with Periyar.
53. Singaravelu Chettiar quoted by C.V.K. Amirthavalliar in her speech made at Kuala Lumpur. See, *Kudi Arasu*, 20 October 1940.
54. *Kudi Arasu*, 28 December 1938.
55. Under Secretary Safe Secret file, 16 October 1934, Appendix B, Appendix H, pp. 20, 45–48.
56. The Tamil Flag carried the symbols of the three ancient kingdoms, i.e. Chera, Chola and pandias.
57. Sami Chidambaranar, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

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58. Illancheliyan, *Tamilar Thodutha Por* (The War Waged by Tamils), Madras, n.d., pp. 118–19.
59. See for example, *Kudi Arasu*, 18 September 1938.
60. Ibid., 20 November 1938.
61. Illancheliyan, *op. cit.*, pp. 148–9.
62. Ibid., pp. 148–50.
63. *Kudi Arasu*, 28 December 1938.
64. Ibid., 20 November 1938 (emphasis mine).
65. Devadasis were young girls dedicated, by custom, to temples and treated as wedded to the God. In practice, these girls, who were often trained in music and dance, were used as concubines by upper-caste men.
66. *Kudi Arasu*, 13 December 1925.
67. Interview with Mr. C. Selvaraj, (The grandson of Ramamirtham Ammaiyar), Madras, 13 July 1989.
68. *Kudi Arasu*, 13 December 1925.
69. *Murasoli*, Pongal Malar, January 1956, p. 52.
70. Interview with Mr. C. Selvaraj, *op. cit.*
71. For instance see, *Kudi Arasu*, 10 September 1933.
72. Interview with Sivagami Chidambaranar, Madras, 5 April 1989.
73. Iryanan, *Suyamariyadai Chudoroligal* (Shining Stars of Self Respect Movement), Madras, p. 60; Illanchelian, *op. cit.*, pp. 116–120.
74. Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammal, *Tasikalin Mosavalai Allathu Matipettra Mainar* (The Treacherous net of the Dasis or a Minor grown wise), Madras, 1936.
75. Kamil V. Zvelebil, 'A Devadasi as the author of a Tamil Novel,' *Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies*, September, 1987, p. 155.
76. Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammal, *op. cit.*, pp. 2–4. S. Satyamurthi was the then minister in the Congress legislature who strongly opposed the legislation against the *Devadasi* system.
77. *Dravida Nadu*, 22 and 29 April 1945; 13 May 1945.
78. Interview with Mr. C. Selvaraj, *op. cit.*
79. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question*, Occasional Paper No. 94, Center for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1987.
80. For an elaboration of this argument with instances, see, Gail Minault, 'The Extended family as Metaphor and the Expansion of women's Realm' in Gail Minault, ed., *The Extended Family, Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan*, Delhi, 1981.
81. Gail Minault, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
    Writing about Nationalist Movement, Partha Chatterjee notes, 'In fact the image of women as Goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home' (See, Partha Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, p. 20).
82. Sandip Bandyopadhyay, 'The 'fallen' and Non-cooperation,' *Manushi*, July–August, 1989.
83. Thiru V. Kalyasundaranar, *Penin Perumai Allathu Vazkai Thunai*, Madras, 1986 (later edition).
84. Barbara N. Ramusack, 'Embattled Advocates: The debate over Birth Control in India, 1920–1940', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1989.
85. Muthulakshmi Reddy papers, Subject file No. 11, Part. II.
86. Muthulakshmi Reddy's letter to the editor of *Tamilnadu* (a Tamil newspaper) in Reddy papers, Subject file No. 12, Part II, p. 79.
87. Swadesamitran, 28 November 1928. A leading Congress activist Salem C. Vijayaraghavachariyar got his daughter, who had not yet attained puberty, hurriedly married, before the child marriage Restraint Act could be enforced. See, C.S. Lakshmi. *The Face behind the Mask, Women in Tamil Literature*, p. 22, Delhi, 1984.
88. For instance see, V.B. Thamaraikanni's speech at Madras Tamil Women Conference in 1938. Illanchelian, *op. cit.*, p. 138.
89. K. Veeramani (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 51–64.

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